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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000523

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
MCC FOR S GROFF, D NASSIRY, E BURKE AND F REID

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: OPPOSITION LEADER OUTLINES AGGRESSIVE
STRATEGY TO HIGHLIGHT GOVERNMENT'S SHORTCOMINGS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Ambassador met United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe on March 30 to press Wickremesinghe to stay involved in working towards a political solution to Sri Lanka's widening conflict. Wickremesinghe outlined the UNP's new aggressive strategy toward the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), including the launch of an on-line newspaper to buck the recent trend of media self-censorship based on fear of retaliation by the administration. Wickremesinghe added that the UNP will launch a public relations campaign to attack the GSL's human rights record. Ambassador and Wickremesinghe also discussed recent developments including reports of a scandal involving former Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera and President Rajapaksa's circumvention of Amendment 17 to Sri Lanka's Constitution. END SUMMARY.

UNP HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE

12. (C) On March 30, Ambassador met opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to discuss the United National Party's important role in finding an acceptable political solution to the ethnic conflict. Ambassador expressed concern that the SLFP's much-delayed devolution proposal would be less far-reaching than the 2000 proposal offered by then-President Kumaratunga. He encouraged Wickremesinghe to maintain pressure on the SLFP to present a viable devolution plan (septel will report in more detail on Ambassador's discussions regarding the devolution proposal.) Wickremesinghe agreed that the administration proposal would likely not be sufficiently ambitious to be able to help the peace process. He believed that President Rajapaksa was seeking merely to buy time while the military proceeded with plans to "clear" the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from the North and East. Ambassador stressed that the UNP must "stay in the game" and pressure the administration to present a genuine peace proposal. Wickremesinghe responded

that while the UNP might try to gain leverage by threatening to withdraw from the process, it would not actually withdraw.

Wickremesinghe said the UNP's committed to ratchet up pressure on the GSL not only regarding the devolution proposal, but also on human rights and the humanitarian crisis.

WICKREMESINGHE OUTLINES UNP'S PLAN OF ATTACK

13. (C) Responding to media criticism that the UNP has failed to mount a genuine opposition, Wickremesinghe outlined his party's new strategy to hold the SLFP accountable for its human rights record. Wickremesinghe touted the launch of an on-line Sinhala newspaper that should become operational after the Sri Lankan New Year celebration ends on April 16. The newspaper, funded by the UNP, would criticize the Rajapaksa government for human rights abuses, including disappearances and extra-judicial killings, as well as the mounting humanitarian crisis in the East and North. Wickremesinghe told Ambassador that he was pressuring the Editor's Guild, comprised of Sri Lanka's major news publications, to hold new elections and appoint a board that would not knuckle under to GSL threats against papers critical of the administration. Wickremesinghe said that journalists who would not otherwise be able to publish critical articles could do so through the UNP's on-line newspaper.

NEW CHARGES AGAINST SAMARAWEEERA

14. (C) Wickremesinghe explained accusations leveled by some

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newspapers that former Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera committed fraud while serving concurrently as Minister for Ports and Civil Aviation. Samaraweera allegedly accepted a campaign donation in exchange for granting an expanded tract of land to a corporation seeking to increase its holdings in a southern Sri Lankan port. Wickremesinghe noted that while the campaign donation was probably not illegal, the question is whether the contribution was tantamount to a bribe. Wickremesinghe said it was too early to tell if the allegations were true, but thought it was another example of the Rajapaksa administration seeking to use relatively minor incidents to silence one of its most vocal critics.

CONSTITUTIONAL COUNCIL REMAINS NON-FUNCTIONAL

15. (C) Ambassador raised concerns about the Rajapaksa Government's circumvention of Amendment 17 to Sri Lanka's Constitution, which requires that a Constitutional Council appoint certain key governmental officials to their posts. (Note: The Council is comprised of 10 members, but a dispute as to whether the tenth member should come from the leftist, Sinhalese nationalist JVP or the Tamil National Alliance has blocked the filling of the last seat.) The GSL has taken the position that the Council is incomplete and, as such, that Rajapaksa himself has the right to appoint all these officials. Wickremesinghe stated that Rajapaksa was blatantly circumventing the Constitution, but argued that the President must first resolve the issue of who should be the tenth member of the Council. Ambassador remarked that the international community considered an independent Council critical to Sri Lanka's checks and balances, and urge the UNP to work with the SLFP to resolve the 17th Amendment divisions.

17. (C) In a speech in Parliament on April 3, Wickremesinghe took the government to task for its handling of the LTTE air attack on Katunayake air base. He accused the GSL of abdicating its responsibility for providing security for the air base and international airport while spending large sums on a new start-up budget airline. He also criticized the government's strategy, saying the Rajapaksa administration

was paying lip service to the peace process, allowing it to languish while it pursued an elusive military victory over the LTTE. He took the government to task for the delay in putting forward a devolution proposal, for failing to stop the wave of abductions and extrajudicial killings, and for attempts to intimidate the media. Wickremesinghe urged instead a renewed commitment to a peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict through negotiation.

18. (C) COMMENT: After enduring months of criticism by Sri Lanka's media that the UNP was not doing enough to oppose the administration's hardline policies, Wickremesinghe appears intent on turning the situation around -- almost all at once.

Wickremesinghe outlined in an uncharacteristic, rapid-fire fashion the UNP's strategy to take on the Rajapaksa administration's shortcomings through an aggressive, sustained media campaign. Wickremesinghe said he would be "sticking his neck out" in the future by challenging the administration publicly. Pressure from the UNP grassroots undoubtedly contributes much to his motivation for the change in style: many party activists had been frustrated by the lack of dynamic opposition to government policies. However, an administration as combative as the Rajapaksa team will undoubtedly feel compelled to respond in kind to this new challenge.

BLAKE